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## Rethinking Our Current Challenges

### *The Context for Change*

In this chapter we will discuss the challenges in higher education that are currently creating a climate conducive to change. We will look at our opportunities for innovation through the lens that Peter Drucker (2002) offered in relation to conditions that make change possible. Drucker outlined seven areas of potential opportunity which can support innovation. Five of those are apparent in higher education today: new knowledge, changes in perception, demographic changes, industry and market changes, and process needs.

### **The Time for Innovation**

Before we outline our strategy for undertaking this monumental task of shifting to a new paradigm, we need to make the case for making this shift at all. One of the many points that we debated as co-authors was whether it was absolutely necessary to recount the litany of stresses currently affecting higher education. Since everyone reads every day about the technological, societal, market, and political pressures on higher education, we questioned whether more discussion of these pressures would be informative, repetitive, or simply depressing for the reader.

After much thought, discussion, and coffee, we realized that we were thinking about this question from a habitual way of seeing the issues, in part because we too have read so often about these issues as *problems*. Instead of viewing these issues as negatives, the high winds and hard rains of the perfect storm intent upon sinking our ship, we reminded ourselves that storms are not solely forces of destruction but natural events that generate great power, that usher in a new weather system, that clear debris and refresh our environment. Our goal is to demonstrate how the forces that we read about and discuss on a daily basis are, in fact, power to be harnessed, opportunities for change. In Clark Kerr's 1994 analysis of the history of higher education, a history that he says gets more glorious upon reflection while fear of the future gets more dreadful, he poses the question, Why are we always so happy looking backward and so unhappy looking forward? We will undertake the challenge of looking forward, if not with complete happiness, at least with cautious optimism.

If we analyze the evolution of higher education in the United States we will see strategic junctions and times of significant challenges. In each era, academic institutions responded and took action, and higher education, subsequently, was strengthened. The calls today to reevaluate higher education are consistent with that pattern. We are at a strategic junction in which many internal and external variables are leading to questions and concerns about the relevancy of higher education, its current status, and its path to the future.

As a result, many universities, organizations, accreditation bodies, governments, and researchers are engaged in efforts to innovate. Their goal is to find ways to assure that, despite the significant challenges higher education faces, it will continue to be relevant, a key contributor to advancing knowledge and educating people for productive and successful lives. This role of higher education is necessary for sustaining a prosperous civic society. The study of the current challenges will be benefited greatly by examining colleges and universities as open systems, dynamic organisms,

shaped by and shaping the environment. It is the unique structure, mission, role, and value of each university, understood in the context of the changing environment, which will allow us to address the challenges, maximize the opportunities, and also develop an enhanced vision for higher education. While there are general features and challenges common to all institutions, each institution also has unique features and challenges; there is no one-size-fits-all challenge or solution. With that in mind, we will discuss general and significant threats all institutions face, large or small, public or private. It is a time of great opportunities for those who have an interest in shaping the future of higher education, for those who, like Ernest Shackleton, maintain optimism in the face of extreme challenge.

Research on innovation and entrepreneurship demonstrates that in times of crisis or economic hardship, the opportunities for innovation increase, for the sense of crisis creates motivation for change. For example, the skyrocketing cost of gasoline in 2008 created a sense of crisis for individuals and businesses, thus creating a climate conducive to innovation in the area of alternative fuels. The sense of crisis creates a willingness and an interest in these innovations on the part of consumers and innovators, who if gas were one dollar per gallon would most likely be disinterested.

Innovative change is greater than incremental change because it results in a new condition that is measurably different from the status quo. Innovation may be achieved through the introduction of new or different policies, regulations, or practices and procedures. Our definition of innovation includes changes and processes that expand and reconceive the scope of higher education.

Management expert Peter Drucker (2002) suggests that most innovations “result from a conscious, purposeful search for innovation opportunities, which are found only in a few situations” (p. 96). He identifies seven sources of potential opportunity through which systematic analysis and knowledge can support innovation. Some are internal to organizations, for example, process needs and market changes. Others are external sources of opportunity, for example,

demographic changes, new knowledge, and changes in perception. We will look at five of these innovation opportunities which offer the greatest potential for stimulating change in higher education. These forces are converging to create a climate conducive to innovation and subsequently to transformation. Drucker explains that at the heart of successful entrepreneurship is innovation: “the effort to create purposeful focused change in an enterprise’s economic or social potential” (p. 96). This is achieved through “a commitment to the systematic practice of innovation”(p. 95). The future of higher education depends upon innovative entrepreneurs to lead this purposeful and focused change.

## **New Knowledge**

The first area of potential opportunity identified by Drucker (2002) is new knowledge. New knowledge is influencing higher education on three fronts. First, discoveries and innovations are accelerating at a tremendous rate, changing discipline content and the prerequisites to adequately prepare graduates for the workplace. Especially in the sciences and technology, new knowledge is growing at an exponential rate that nearly precludes adequate preparation of graduates in our current system.

On the second front, new knowledge about how people learn is affecting our ways of teaching and preparing graduates. Many practices that have long been part of good teaching as a result of common sense and an intuitive understanding of human behavior are now part of an emerging body of research into brain functioning and learning, motivation and learning, and the role of memory as well as other affective concerns regarding power and control.

In addition, new knowledge in the form of technology is changing how we teach. Computer technology, specifically, is revolutionizing course management and delivery, and the Internet has tremendously increased the accessibility of information and changed the process of conducting research. All these forms of new

knowledge are leading educators to question common pedagogical practices about what to teach as well as how to teach it. New knowledge in terms of what we teach and how we teach has provided the motivation for innovation and change.

### Changes in Perception

The second area of potential opportunity identified by Drucker is changes in perception. The public perception of higher education is changing, thus creating a climate conducive to change. Once heralded as the finest educational system in the world, higher education in the United States is now perceived to be falling behind other countries and not producing qualified graduates. John Doerr, considered one of the top technology venture capitalists in the world, called education “the largest and most screwed-up part of the American economy” (quoted in Carlson & Wilmot, 2006, p. 267). Similarly, Peter Drucker said, “Thirty years from now [1997] the big university campuses will be relics. Universities won’t survive. . . . Do you realize that the cost of higher education has risen as fast as the cost of health care? Such totally uncontrollable expenditures, without any visible improvement in either the content or the quality of education, means that the system is rapidly becoming untenable. Higher education is in deep crisis” (quoted in Carlson & Wilmot, 2006, p. 267). These and other leaders in business and industry have chimed in on the emerging public outcry for accountability in higher education. Education professors Terenzini and Pascarella (1994) called into question some of the basic tenets of American higher education. They found that educational quality did not correlate with an institution’s reputation or standing. Similarly, they questioned the assumption that good researchers are good teachers, calling into question education techniques, in particular the lecture method.

In an open letter entitled *An American Imperative: Higher Expectations for Higher Education*, the Wingspread Group (1993) charged

that “some faculties and institutions certify for graduation too many students who cannot read and write very well, too many whose intellectual depth and breadth are unimpressive, and too many whose skills are inadequate in the face of the demands of contemporary life” (p. 1). They conclude that “A disturbing and dangerous mismatch exists between what American society needs of higher education and what it is receiving. Nowhere is the mismatch more dangerous than in the quality of undergraduate preparation provided by many campuses” (p. 1).

In support of this claim, a National Adult Literacy Survey conducted in 1993 found that large numbers of graduates were unable to use basic skills including reading, writing, computation, and elementary problem solving (Lucas, 1994, xiii). A decade later Brown University conducted the Futures Project, a four-year examination of the major forces affecting the future of higher education. The Futures Project investigated the impact of competition and market values on higher education, targeting three specific areas: autonomy and accountability, responsibility for student learning, and access and attainment. In the report on the project, *The Future of Higher Education* (Newman, Couturier, & Scurry, 2004), the authors called for institutional responsibility with regard to student learning, claiming that at most institutions “there is an unspoken, comfortable conspiracy between faculty and students not to bother each other too much; mediocrity reigns” (p. 136).

A similar claim was made in *Declining by Degrees: Higher Education at Risk* (Hersh & Merrow, 2005), a collection of essays accompanying a PBS documentary, which exposed a lack of accountability for student learning and an unhealthy focus on research and athletics as well as other prestige factors that had little to do with educating students. Even more candid was Lewis’s (2006) indictment of undergraduate education, in which he claimed that universities have forgotten their purpose, namely, creating educated adults who will take responsibility for society. In the same vein, Bok’s (2005) critique of higher education’s shortcomings focused both on

the failure of universities to prepare citizens and the need to improve teacher quality because not enough attention is paid to pedagogy.

This is not the first time, of course, that higher education has been deemed as disaster. Lucas (1994) identified three common themes among commentators from 1965 through the 1990s: (1) professionalization of scholarship in higher education was a factor contributing to fragmentation; (2) the tendency to view knowledge as a commodity contributed to the confusion of what constituted a relevant liberal education; and (3) the structure of the university itself was a root cause of the decline. “Such allegations had been heard before, of course,” said Lucas. “But they were given new clarity and force in analyses of the apparent decline of liberal educational values” (p. 268). The many critiques of the state of higher education have clarified the issues creating external pressure for changes in higher education.

## Demographic Changes

The third area of potential opportunity identified by Drucker is demographic changes. Significant social, economic, and technological changes are challenging universities to reconsider their business. The profile of the undergraduate has changed dramatically. Prior to World War II, universities educated a fairly homogeneous population: 60 percent male, 97 percent Caucasian, middle and upper class backgrounds, upper third or upper quarter ranking in high school (Lucas, 1994, p. xiv). The shift in this demographic began with the GI Bill of 1944. Lucas writes, “The Serviceman’s Readjustment Act of 1944—popularly dubbed the GI Bill of Rights—more than any other single initiative, brought massive changes to higher education in the postwar era” (p. xv). This influx of nontraditional students, approximately 60,000 men and women, “altered the meaning of a college education” (p. xiv).

These demographic changes continued throughout the succeeding decades. Beginning in the 1960s, women and minorities began

attending college in greater numbers, and by the 1970s women outnumbered men (Lucas, 1994, p. xvi). Huber and Hutchings (2005) reported that the profile of the eighteen-year-old entering college supported by parents and working only part time has become the exception rather than the norm. Close to half of the undergraduates in the United States are more than twenty-four years old, and more than one quarter are working adults over thirty. The part-time student is quickly becoming the norm. Additionally, undergraduates who are married and/or have children have become routine. Nearly 60 percent are pursuing occupational degrees or professional studies (Lucas, 1994, p. xvi).

The nature of the traditional-aged student has also changed. Often called the *millennials*, these highly social students, technologically savvy and intolerant of delays, create new demands on the system from housing to admission to marketing to pedagogy. Their highly social nature leads them to prefer teamwork and group activity and to keep constant contact with their social network. And with the growing calls for accessibility, more and more students are the first of their family to attend college. No longer is a homogeneous student population the norm or the goal. This changing population of students adds another new demand on institutions while offering an opportunity to support innovation.

In addition to the changing demographics of students is a shift in demographics of faculty and staff. Between 1976 and 2005 full-time nonfaculty professional staff grew at a rate of 281 percent. At the same time the rate of administrative staff doubled (American Association of University Professors, 2008). The growth rate of full- and part-time nontenure-track faculty was 200 percent. The American Association of University Professors (2008) reports that “the more than 200 percent increase in the number of contingent faculty on the payrolls represents a deprofessionalization of the faculty role in higher education” (p. 14). Similarly, Schuster and Finkelstein (2006) write about the restructuring of the American faculty, noting that no one is content with the way campuses are governed, and the



tension between managerial culture and faculty-shared governance is becoming greater, contributing to a reshaping and redistribution of academic work.

Gappa, Austin, and Trice (2007) examined what they describe as the changing context for faculty work and noted that the rise of temporary, short-term, and part-time faculty constitutes one of the “most significant responses by universities and colleges to the challenges posed by fiscal constraints and by the need to stay competitive in a rapidly changing environment” (p. 15). They conclude that the institutional goal of gaining flexibility and cost efficiency through the shifts in faculty appointment types has created an inequitable two-tiered system that undermines the sense of commitment that faculty bring to their work. These nontenure-track faculty members have little or no role in shared governance and more often than not are dividing their energy teaching at multiple institutions. In sum, the dramatic increase in administrative staff and nontenured faculty represents a major shift in university personnel that directly affects the core service of the university, academics.

### Industry and Market Changes

The fourth area of potential opportunity identified by Drucker is industry and market changes. If it were not enough for institutions to respond to the changing audience, the subjects that are taught are also rapidly changing. The lines between disciplines are becoming increasingly blurred, and the rate of increase of knowledge, especially in the areas of science and technology, is in a perpetual state of acceleration. Added to that are global influences in all areas.

Business and industry have been vocal about the quality of graduates entering the workforce. A 2006 publication titled *Educating Engineers for the 21st Century: The Industry View* called for engineers to have a sound knowledge of the engineering fundamentals within their discipline as well as social and interpersonal skill

sets including communication, team-working, and business skills (Spinks, Silburn, & Birchill, p. 3). Charles Vest (2007), president emeritus of MIT, called for engineering graduates to “write and communicate well, think about ethics and social responsibility, conceive and operate systems of great complexity within a framework of sustainable development and be prepared to live and work as global citizens” (p. 1).

The National Leadership Council for Liberal Education and America’s Promise (LEAP; Crutcher, O’Brien, Corigan, & Schneider, 2007), an initiative sponsored by the American Association of State Colleges and Universities, identified analogous aims and outcomes for all students, regardless of discipline, outcomes necessary for survival in a twenty-first-century workforce. In preparing graduates for the twenty-first-century workforce, we need to take into consideration the features of that workforce. Kalantizis and Cope (2002) make the observation that “a division of labour into its minutest deskilled components is replaced by ‘multi-skilled’ all-round workers who are flexible enough to be able to do complex and integrated work” (p.20). New workers will be what they call “portfolio workers,” whose strength is not in career stability and content knowledge but in range and versatility. The learning culture that will foster a transformation to the needs of the twenty-first-century workforce is one in which learning is a matter of repertoire, flexibility, and multiple talents.

## Process Needs

The fifth area of potential opportunity identified by Drucker is process needs. In light of the growing concerns that our graduates are emerging from our institutions without appropriate knowledge, skills, and abilities, we must begin to question our traditional process of educating students. Our current model of undergraduate education has been based on an epistemology, methodology, and instructional paradigm focused on the transference of information

and assimilation of knowledge. As technology transformation has accelerated and problems have become more complex, we have responded by adding courses that attempt to accelerate information transfer. However, it is becoming apparent that covering more or different content is not the solution.

We must begin to question the belief that knowledge in and of itself is valuable. In answering this question, more and more institutions are shifting their focus from knowledge to learning, from information transfer to helping students develop lifelong learning capacity in order to make the educational experience a transformative one. Adding more courses, transferring more information, does not transform students. Students will be transformed by increasing the depth of their learning and their self-awareness of how they learn. Our process of educating students must address this fundamental need if we are to develop lifelong learners with the capacity to readily adapt to a changing world.

While we are closer to reaching consensus on what the new graduate must know in order to succeed in the changing world and the twenty-first-century workforce, we have yet to agree on *how* those outcomes are best achieved. As Guskin and Marcy (2002) write, “Higher education now faces a critical choice about this process [by which knowledge is delivered]. Present forces in higher education will either lead to significant reform in the undergraduate educational environment or to a significant diminution in the quality of faculty work life because of sharp increases in faculty teaching loads and related work” (p. 8). Answering this question of process is an opportunity for innovation.

## A Perfect Storm

These variables affecting higher education are not new. Fifty years ago, Clark Kerr, then president of the University of California system, coined the term *multiversity* to describe the transformation of the university to become increasingly responsive to market

demands. In referring to the challenges facing academic leaders as a result of the explosion of knowledge and rising market demands of business, government, the military, and other groups, Lucas (1994) writes, "Too harassed to lead, university administrators had become mediators among competing interests, trying to balance contradictory demands, treating students like consumers, knowledge as a factory product and course offerings as supermarket wares" (p. 269). The intensity of these challenges has not abated in the past fifty years, but intensified.

Each of the converging challenges seems like overwhelming in its own right, but like a perfect storm, the confluence of these five challenges generates a condition or circumstance that is far more powerful. Together these five challenges have created a perfect storm, a perfect opportunity to innovate on various fronts; they have created a sense of crisis that makes innovation more likely to be accepted by those who might otherwise resist change. Academic leaders can seize the opportunity to meet these challenges and, rather than react to them, take a proactive position and use the challenges to transform higher education.

The challenges facing higher education are serious, and they will test academic leaders to be innovative and creative in moving their institutions away from the status quo. This will be achieved not through incremental change but through systemic change. Many institutions are currently implementing isolated innovations to address some of the changes discussed in this chapter. These actions, although successful on a small scale, are not addressing systemic issues. The Higher Learning Commission (HLC), the largest of the regional accrediting agencies, both in number and type of institution, provides a good gauge of the efficacy of these individual efforts. Steven D. Crow, the departing president of the HLC, noted at the 2008 annual meeting that while institutions have been working diligently to figure out what their students should be learning and whether they are, in fact, learning, it is not clear whether all the individual efforts are adding up to much (Lederman, 2008,

p. 1). Institutions are employing a wide variety of approaches, many of which are very small in scope, as they address individual challenges. Instead, leaders need to see the confluence of the challenges. Academic leaders need to assess the current situation from a comprehensive view and assume the risks required to chart a course through this perfect storm.

Transforming higher education will require innovation and a spirit of entrepreneurship. As the political, social, economic, and technological environment continues to change rapidly, more attention must be given to the role of innovation and entrepreneurship in addressing those changes. Leaders who accept this challenge will be the learning entrepreneurs, the leaders who will lead dynamic change. Drawing on an agenda put forth by Mintrom (1997) in defining policy entrepreneurs, we define learning entrepreneurs as those individuals who identify problems, shape policy, and move their institutions away from the status quo.

Recognizing that there is no single remedy or solution to the complex challenges facing institutions of higher education and that each institution has unique characteristics and features, the framework that we provide is just that, a framework, a scaffolding that will support independent investigation, an agenda to guide leaders as they take actions to innovate and redefine higher education. The comprehensive framework that we propose is predicated on the belief that in order to transform higher education, we must analyze the paradigm that we operate within. We will then call for a shift to a new paradigm, the shift toward learning-centeredness that was introduced by Barr and Tagg in 1995.

## Concluding Thoughts

In describing this time of transformation, Dee Hock, former CEO of Visa Corporation, said: “We are at the very point in time when a four-hundred-year-old is dying and another is struggling to be born, a shift in culture, science, society and institutions enormously greater

than the world has ever experienced” (quoted in Waldrop, 1996, p. 75). His words are reminiscent of the famous lines by English poet Matthew Arnold describing the birth of the modern era: “Wandering between two worlds, one dead,/The other powerless to be born.” Both use the birth and death metaphor, a metaphor that is not only appropriate but helps to explain the emotional intensity of our situation.

The birth-and-death metaphor resonates because our institutions are organic artifacts. They live and grow and evolve as a result of the human interactions that take place within them. We use human metaphors to talk about institutions when we consider elements like growth or health of the institution. For this reason we cannot discount the human element in this enterprise, for education and leadership are all about people and relationships. As we examine the commonalities between good teaching and good leading, we will see that the core competencies for both involve human relationships, understanding people, caring about people, and developing the capacity to motivate and inspire them.

One element of the human condition is the fear of death. Even when we know that death is appropriate, a necessary condition, it's hard to let go. We become comfortable and feel safe with what we know, with what is familiar to us, and giving that up is challenging because of the uncertainty involved. To use a mundane example, think of the uncertainty we feel when the IT people take away our computer and give us an upgrade or our institution changes e-mail software. How many of us have said, “Can't I keep my old one? It works just fine.” The irony is that what we are resisting isn't so much the idea of change as the need to learn something new. In order for us to thrive in the new paradigm, we must embrace change but even more important, we must embrace learning. The new paradigm is all about learning, about everyone increasing knowledge, skills, and abilities. The organization as a whole and all the members of the organizational community are learners in a perpetual state of transformation.

The anticipation and excitement of birth is also a key element of the human condition. The use of the birth metaphor for ushering in this new paradigm is apt not only because of the idea of bringing forth something new that is not completely developed, something that holds promise but is still in the progress of development, but also because one of the prevailing metaphors used in describing the role of teachers and leaders in the new paradigm is the midwife, one who attends, coaches, supports. The birth metaphor is also appropriate because birth is a transformative experience for new parents, and new parents reevaluate their priorities, become more intentional about their choices, and examine their fundamental beliefs. The birth metaphor lends a sense of continuation and evolution from the old to the new. Leaders will be challenged to allay the fears of those who will cling to the old paradigm, though it must die if we are to move forward. At the same time leaders will be challenged to inspire, to foster hope, anticipation, and excitement over the prospect of the birth of the new paradigm.

## Chapter Summary

The confluence of challenges that are currently facing higher education makes this a perfect time to lead comprehensive change.

The challenges that create opportunity for innovation include the following:

- **New knowledge**, both in terms of what we teach and how we teach
- **Changes in perception** that are leading those within institutions of higher education as well as those outside to question whether we are effectively functioning, especially in regard to student learning
- **Demographic changes**, including a new generation of students, a new generation of faculty, new nonacademic

professionals within higher education, changing work and study patterns of students, and growing numbers of nontraditional students

- **Industry and market changes** that are leading those who employ our graduates to call for better-skilled workers, which requires changes in what gets taught
- **Process needs** that make information transfer a less appropriate goal of higher education than teaching students how to be lifelong learners